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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000149

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: DESPITE MINOR HICUPS, SUCCESSFUL ELECTION IN THE SOUTH

¶1. Summary: December 15 elections in Basrah and the other three southern provinces generally ran smoothly and without many signs of significant fraud or security incidents. Basrah Regional Embassy Office (REO) Iraqi Provincial Action Officers (IPOAOs) visited three polling centers in the morning and afternoon in Basrah city. Basrawis interviewed at polling stations in the city proclaimed the day a success and spoke optimistically about the future. Voting irregularities in the southern provinces included Iraqi police campaigning for the Unified Iraqi Alliance (List 555) and attempting to influence voting in Basrah, Maysan, and Muthanna provinces.

"Family-style" voting, where a head of family accompanied family members behind the voting booths and voted for them, occurred throughout Basrah. Polling center managers were inconsistent in their handling of cases involving unregistered voters. The violence of December 14 in Nasiriyah, where the headquarters of Ayid Allawi's Iraqi National Accord party and the Communist Party were attacked and burned, was not repeated on election day, although anger simmered among the predominantly Shia population concerning Al Jazeera's alleged slight against Ayatollah Sistani. End Summary.

Security, Stability, and Peace

¶2. Voting in Basrah, Maysan, Dhi Qar, and Muthanna provinces ran smoothly on December 15 with isolated irregularities and no reported signs of significant fraud, security incidents, or technical problems. Polling stations opened and closed on time in all four provinces. REO Basrah IPOAOs visited three different polling stations in Basrah in the morning and again in the afternoon. A festive atmosphere reigned within some polling centers, with blue and white ribbons from the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) cut into banners and festooning the ceilings. Voters, dressed in holiday clothes, socialized in the corridors of the polling centers. Many voters spoke freely to IPOAOs about their opinions of the election and for whom they had voted. One voter, when asked why he thought the elections were important to his family, answered, "For stability and security, to get rid of the terrorists and to build a free, independent Iraq." Registration and voting procedures went smoothly, and in several stations handicapped individuals in wheelchairs and on crutches were assisted into the polling centers in Basrah and Umm Qasr. Outside, traffic restrictions wiped the roads clear of cars, and groups of small children played in the streets.

Iraqi Police Involved in Irregularities

¶3. Although generally calm, IPOAOs observed some irregularities at polling stations in Basrah. At one Basrah polling station, an Iraqi man told the IPOAO that an Iraqi police car parked outside the polling station had been blaring "Vote for 555" up until their convoy arrived on scene. The loudspeaker was abruptly shut off when the international observers appeared. The editor of Al Samawah newspaper in Muthanna province reported that he had seen police putting up posters of "555" and Sadr in the city. A reporter from Al Hurra news in Maysan reported to the REO that Iraqi police trucks were blaring directives to vote for 555 from their loudspeakers. REO Basrah received a report from a Danish non-governmental organization (NGO) worker of a disturbance at a polling station in Basrah (No. 927007) around 12:30 that resulted in the center being emptied out for about 10-15 minutes by Iraqi police. The Basrah IECI Director Hazim Joda explained that the center was closed so that the police could arrest three intoxicated individuals.

Elections "Family-Style"

¶4. Another IPOAO observed "family-style" voting inside two other polling stations. Male heads-of-household escorted one or more family members behind a voting booth and either pointed out which candidate to vote for or blatantly completed all the forms himself while IECI personnel watched passively. After observing a husband filling out his wife's ballot for her, the IPOAO asked the IECI polling station manager why this was allowed. "Illiterate family members are permitted to have another family member assist them in voting," was the IECI official's answer. After the couple had finished voting, the IPOAO drew the wife aside and asked if she had trouble reading the ballot. "Not at all. It was very clear and perfectly legible," was the answer. The IECI official simply shrugged.

Unregistered Voters Try Their Luck at Different Polling Stations

¶5. Reports from observers in Basrah indicate that there was no unified policy being applied by IECI polling center managers to

instances involving voters who do not appear on registration lists and who wish to vote. One observer estimated that about 1,000 individuals in Basrah wished to vote but did not appear on registration lists and did not know where to go to seek help. A Danish NGO observer reported that in at least one case an unregistered voter turned away at one polling center finagled being allowed to vote elsewhere. Some center managers in Basrah instructed unregistered voters to go to a "special" polling center along with proof of identity and citizenship where they could vote. Other reports indicated that some unregistered voters are simply turned away with no guidance.

Al Jazeera Remarks on Sistani Spark Anger

16. A December 14 Al Jazeera report was thought by many to have made disparaging remarks about Ayatollah Sistani, resulting in angry crowds attacking and destroying Allawi's headquarters and the Communist Party headquarters in Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar, that same day. On December 15, voters continued to express anger and displeasure about Al Jazeera's remarks, but no further violence was reported. In Maysan province, groups of protesters chanting support for 555 and against Al Jazeera were reported outside of some polling centers, but voters were otherwise left alone.

Demonstrations, Rallies and Irregularities

17. A demonstration outside a polling center in Basrah was reported by a Danish NGO observer, who said that the station's IECI manager appeared to be attempting to calm the situation down. At another Basrah polling station, an observer reported that voters were being intimidated by 555 supporters outside the center and directed to vote for 555. The polling center manager made no effort to stop this activity. In Az Zubair, a rally of 150 people against the 555 coalition was reported by another NGO worker. Party activists handing out flyers for 555 were noted inside one polling station. The polling station manager reportedly removed the activists.

Short Lines, Long Distances

18. Wait time to vote varied. In most Basrah stations, there was either no or a minimal wait, while in Muthanna province lines of up to 100 people were reported. Even these long lines were moving along smoothly, however, and voters used the occasion to socialize. In a Sunni area of Basrah, some people stated that they had to walk long distances to reach the polling centers, while in others, individuals who had managed to secure vehicle passes reportedly gave rides to people who needed to get to their voting stations. Al Hurra television reported that 400 employees in the North Alrymella oil field were unable to vote because they could not travel to the polling stations where they were registered because of IECI travel restrictions and because they had not been granted permission from the Baghdad IECI to vote at the nearest polling center.

Observers and Media

19. Observers were present in many of the polling stations. Most observers were from the NGO "EIN," although observers representing Da'awa, Fadillah, the Unified Iraqi Alliance, Sunni parties, and the Artists' Union also were noted. Al Iraqiya radio and TV were present and observed the voting in several stations. Al Arabiya TV broadcast interviews with Basrah Governor Mohammed Wa'eli, who encouraged voters to vote for the Fadillah party. The Basrah Chief of Police General Hassan Sewadi and the Basrah IECI Director also were interviewed and expressed their pleasure at how the vote was progressing.

Security

110. A high level of police presence was observed throughout the provinces and in Basrah in particular. Around 10 Iraqi police manned each polling center, with more police on the roads at major intersections. Police cars in Basrah were nearly the only moving vehicles in town. All adults entering polling centers were searched by Iraqi police. No one was allowed to enter polling centers with cell phones or cameras. A table was set up outside centers where people could check their cell phones and cameras and pick them up when finished. Men and women were searched separately but voted in common areas.

Polling

111. Basrah TDY PAO collected polling data from a local media NGO. AFAQ reported collecting 881 responses from Basrah province, including Khor Al-Zubair, Al-Fao and Umm Qasr. The data should not be considered scientific, but rather a version of anecdotal reporting. Reported data included: 43.81 percent of the respondents voted for the 555 list, with 21.11 percent for 731. The poll reported that 49.04 percent indicated that 'family values or morals' were the most important issues affecting their vote, with 34.39 percent indicating 'security.' When asked what the most important personal issue was affecting their vote, 56.98% indicated 'religious values'. Of the responses, 58.91 percent came from men and 41.09 percent from women. Only 15 percent of the responses came from college

educated individuals. More extensive poll data from AFAQ on Maysan, Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces, as well as Al-Manarah Newspaper and Radio Shinasheel, is being processed and will be reported septel.

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